**Dear Lisa**

On a seemingly ordinary summer day, my friend, Lisa, rolled out of bed, threw on her beach-bum digs, slipped into her island flip flops, trotted to the breakfast table, and collapsed on the kitchen’s cold ceramic tile. Her mother sat at the table watching. She fell to the ground and cradled Lisa’s head in her hands. She screamed for her son, Josh, to call 911. Lisa’s small, slender form jerked with convulsions. Her mother held tightly to her, even as she felt the last breaths of life escape.

I was at home sitting curled up on the loveseat reading the comics when the phone rang. My mother answered the phone in the den. I dropped the paper and turned to look at my mom when I heard her cry out, “Oh my God, no!” Then she shifted her gaze from the window to me, and I knew somehow I was involved. She started to frantically grab a notepad and began jotting down notes. I kept hearing her say, “Yes...I understand. Yes...I’m so sorry. Oh, dear God! I will, yes...our prayers are with you...thank you for calling.” My mother hung up the phone and I saw tears rolling down her cheeks as she faced me. She wiped her hands and face on the towel hanging over the sink. She kept shaking her head from side to side and her voice wavered and broke as she tried to talk. “That was Mr. Verbrugge, Lisa collapsed this morning. Her body went into cardiac arrest, and...and...she passed away. Oh ‘Leenie, I’m so sorry.” My body went completely numb and the room started to spin. I remember struggling to catch my breath as if my lungs had collapsed and no air could pass. I felt my mom’s arms embrace me and start rocking me. I tried to talk but all I could get out were guttural sounds like those of a wounded animal. My mom held me tight and wiped strands of hair from my tear-stained cheeks. My mother sat with me the whole morning, all thoughts of work were forgotten. When my breaths finally became relaxed and my shoulders stopped heaving, I looked at my mother and let out one tiny, whisper of a word, “Why?”

“How could she die—she was only 18?”

“I don’t know sweetie, the doctor’s are still looking for answers.”

“But she was supposed to leave for MSU on Friday.”

“I know baby, it’s horrible. Mr. Verbrugge said they’re planning to hold the memorial service on Monday.”

“So soon...I don’t want to go.”

“I know, but you need to. Mr. Verbrugge was hoping you could write something for the service about your trip with Lisa.”

“What...NO! I couldn’t...not now.”

“I know it’ll be hard, but think of Lisa. You two shared something so special.”

“I know, I just don’t think I can...please mom.”

Lisa passed away on Wednesday, August 14th and they were expecting me to write a eulogy to share at her memorial service the following Monday. All I had was five days to sum up my memories of Lisa. Nothing I wrote down made any sense; it was just a jumble of words and thoughts that jumped around incoherently. My heart was aching and I wanted the thoughts of Lisa being dead to stop. I told my mom repeatedly that I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t find the right words. She stroked my cheek and in her soothing, alto voice she said, “Just go up to your room and talk to Lisa. Just tell her how you’re feeling.” I pulled away from her and snapped angrily, “She can’t hear me, she’s dead!” I felt my mother shudder and felt her heartbeat quicken, then she took her hands and put them alongside my face. “Maybe you could write to her instead.”

I let out a huge sigh as I walked up the stairs to my room. I couldn’t imagine talking to Lisa. I sat down at my desk facing out on the meadow and tore out a sheet of paper from my old English comp. notebook. I wrote the words, Dear Lisa, at the top and stared at them. Then I closed my eyes, rested my head in my right palm, and began bawling. I pictured Lisa the last time I saw her. I was waving goodbye to her as she headed to catch her connecting flight to Detroit. I remember she turned around and laughing in that light, sing-song voice of hers yelled, “Hey, you’d better not forget to write. I want to hear all the juicy details about you and Tim.” I felt my cheeks get warm and she started laughing even harder. “Just kidding ‘Leens, love ya’ like a sis.” Then she moved her hand in the air as if writing a note and waved goodbye one more time before disappearing down the terminal.

Just then I opened my eyes. I pulled open my top desk drawer and pulled out a postcard. There was Goldie Gopher holding a sign that read “Welcome to the Big Ten.” I planned to send it to Lisa. I turned it over and saw the post-it note with her address on it. I bought it 2 weeks ago on my way to the baggage claim. My thoughts turned to Lisa and I kept hearing her say, “You’d better not forget to write.”

It was at that moment I felt a power come over me like I’ve never felt before. My memories of Lisa began pouring out. Something was pushing my pen across the paper. I remember sitting at my desk watching my pen go back and forth across the paper but the words seemed incomprehensible. I don’t know how long I sat there. When my mom came to check on me, I was asleep at my desk with my head resting on my elbow and the pen still clutched in between my fingers. My mom helped me up from the chair, pulled back my lace comforter, and tucked me into bed. She stroked my arm and kissed me on the forehead. I could feel her warm breath as she whispered in my ear, “Sweet dreams, may the angels always watch over my sweet baby girl.”

That night I slept without dreams; peaceful silence instead of twisting darkness and mutated faces. When I woke the next morning, I found the pages my pen had filled up the night before. I read through my notes and realized Lisa’s eulogy had written itself. Here on the pages were all the memories I had struggled to get out. The first time we met was on the connecting flight from Minneapolis to L.A. Both of us embarrassed to be wearing our bright green Girl Scout uniforms but chattering non-stop about how cool it would be island hopping in the Pacific. Neither of us had much experience flying and here we were flying to Micronesia on an International Opportunity to teach islanders how to run day camps. I even drew a doodle of the night we rode in the boat to one of Truk’s outer islands; the rain was beating down and the boat hovered just inches above the water as it raced across the atoll. We were roommates during the entire two-month adventure. Many times we stayed as guests in the islanders’ homes where English was only understood by the two of us. I remembered nights we forced ourselves to stay awake to make sure the jumping geckos and massive spiders didn’t get in our blankets. We spent the days teaching the islanders games and songs, and took so many photos of the beautiful lush tropical scenery and carefree, welcoming natives that our film canisters were bulging in our backpacks on the way home. We spent the first nights of the trip introducing ourselves and sharing our backgrounds, and then those nights turned into midnight chat sessions where we shared our inner most thoughts and dreams. We went from strangers on a plane, to trusting each other so completely that we called each other ‘sis. Everything was here in my notes: details about her infectious laughter, her bizarre obsession with leather, and her dreams for the future. I sat there and sifted through my words. I tried to capture the essence of Lisa in my words. I wanted everyone to know what a special person Lisa was and how blessed I was, even for a few precious weeks, to know her.